

Libby-woodchips
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MSNBC: EPA knew about Mont. contamination

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AP NewsBreak: EPA knew about Mont. contamination

By MATTHEW BROWN

The Associated Press **AP** Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — Federal regulators knew potentially contaminated bark and wood chips were being sold from a Superfund site in the asbestos-tainted town of Libby, Mont., for three years before they stopped the practice, according to a letter from the Environmental Protection Agency to U.S. Sen. Max Baucus. The Democrat asked for an investigation into the contaminated piles in response to an Associated Press story earlier this month that detailed how the wood chips and bark had been widely used as landscaping material by residents and government officials.

Asbestos from a W.R. Grace mine in Libby has killed an estimated 400 people.

The EPA previously said it learned last fall that the wood chips and bark stockpiled at a former lumber mill were being sold by a local economic development official. But in the July 14 letter to Baucus, the agency acknowledges it knew of the sales since at least October 2007.

The EPA found asbestos in the piles in 2007 but never quantified how much. The agency is now going back and trying to gauge the health risk. Results from additional testing on the piles are expected this summer.

"EPA needs to understand it has a responsibility to earn Libby's trust and that means going above and beyond to keep folks informed," Baucus said in a statement. "Priority number one is making sure folks are safe, and these new tests will help us figure out if the wood chips are dangerous and whether more steps need to be taken to protect the community."

EPA spokeswoman Sonya Pennock said the agency decided to halt the sales in March because it had new information on the toxicity of asbestos in Libby and had been hearing concerns from some local residents about the wood chips.

During the 2007 testing, four of 20 samples taken from the wood chips piles showed the presence of asbestos. Air samples from the site were negative.

"At the time it did not rise to the level of action," Pennock said when asked why the sales weren't halted earlier. "Now we have the new toxicity values and so we are going to apply those at" the

former mill site.

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